

Remembering Paul and Sheila Wellstone

by Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle

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Now we know why Paul was always moving so quickly. There was so much he wanted to do while he was here with us and not much time to do it in – kind of like that commercial from his first campaign. Paul was a master of long-shot, upset victories. But his greatest upset was beating the clock. He packed more life, more love, more courage, more goodness and more meaning into his 58 years than just about anyone I have ever known.

Today, Senate Democrats held the first meeting of our caucus in nearly a month. Before the meeting, I had thought, How sad it will be not to have Paul with us. Not to laugh at some joke he would tell on himself. Not to be able to celebrate with him the re-election that I feel certain he, and all of you, were on your way to winning. Not to hear him say -- one more time -- “Just 30 seconds, Tom. Please, I just need 30 seconds” – all of us knowing full well that he would take more than that. I expected to feel an awful sadness in that meeting. Instead, we all felt Paul’s presence.

William Maxwell, the former editor of the New Yorker, penned a letter several years ago to a friend who had just lost her brother. “Dear Faith,” he wrote, “If you love someone with your whole heart, it is unbearable to have them die. And because you can’t bear it, you don’t let it happen. Without even thinking about it you, the one who didn’t die, enlarge your nature so that there is room for them too, and they go on living in you, and through you. It is something I have experienced.” Love, Bill.

Paul Wellstone loved with his whole heart. And he was loved, in return by all of us, by Democrats and Republicans and people who didn’t care one bit about party labels -- by just about everyone he ever touched. He was only 5'5", but he made us all bigger people.

So much was lost in that crash. But so much survives: Paul’s sense of hope. His joy. His goodness. The example of his stunning moral courage. All of these things endure. And we don’t have to let them go. We can enlarge our nature so there is room in us for Paul’s remarkable goodness to go on living in us and through us. He showed us how, because he was a great teacher to the end.

We all have so many wonderful memories of Paul and Sheila. My office manager told me about the time, a couple of years ago, when my staff was having a clothing drive, and Sheila walked into our office. She didn’t have any clothing with her, but she had a key. She introduced herself to a member of my staff, gave her the key and said, “This is the key to our house. Paul and I heard you were having a clothing drive, so we went through our stuff and put together about three boxes of donations. But I hurt my back, and there’s too much there for me to carry. So could you just let yourself in? They’re in the living room.” Remember -- this from the same guy who came to Washington with so few decent clothes that a bunch of Senators got together to buy him some suits!

No cause was too large, and no gesture was too small for Paul and for Sheila. They lived their ideals. They were inseparable and they were deeply in love. I remember so many times when Paul was facing tough decisions. He would always -- I mean always -- say, "I've got to talk to Sheila." While losing them both, along with Marcia and the others, makes the loss even more unbearable for us, it's probably as it should be. Paul could not have survived losing Sheila. He needed and adored her.

It was a joy and an honor to have him in the Senate. He said that he came here to rattle some cages -- and sometimes he rattled mine. He always told the truth. And he always remembered who he was speaking for. He was the soul of the Senate. He had that rarest and most difficult kind of bravery: moral courage. He fought to the end for what he believed in, even if it meant standing alone. And he fought in a way that ennobled his causes and inspired us all. He was, as Senator Harkin said so beautifully, the mirror in which many of us looked. And often, when we looked at Paul, we saw our best selves. The irony of his death is that we don't have him here now, at the very moment we need him most.

I read that, as a young political science professor, Paul didn't spend a lot of time publishing and doing the other sorts of things one usually does to advance an academic career. He preferred organizing farmers and other "little people," as he called them. Apparently, that didn't go over too well with the college administration. One day, they told Paul his contract would not be renewed. But an amazing thing happened. Paul's students and his other supporters protested so loudly and long that the administration not only renewed Paul's contract, they granted him tenure. I'm sure he appreciated the fact that the people he taught to organize ended up organizing for him.

If there was any way we could protest and reverse this decision -- if we could stage a protest at the gates of heaven and bring Paul and Sheila and the others back -- it would be the biggest, most diverse, most beautiful protest you ever saw. Sadly, we can't bring them back. But we can enlarge our own natures to let more of their courage and decency and hopefulness into our own hearts. We can fight, as they did, for the working people who struggle every day to make ends meet. We can stand up for children and seniors. We can speak for those whose voices would not otherwise be heard, including those who struggle with mental illness. We can put those on the margins of society at the heart of our efforts. And we can inspire others to carry on after us, just as Paul inspired us. If we do, Paul Wellstone will win his biggest upset of all. He will beat even death. We will give him far more than those 30 seconds he was always asking for. He will live forever.

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